

Library Advocacy

This Trustee Essential covers:

- *What are library advocates and why are they needed*
- *How to establish priorities for advocacy*
- *Ways to act as an advocate*

One of your major responsibilities as a public library trustee is to act as an advocate for the library.

In simple terms, a library advocate is someone who understands the value and importance of public library service and who communicates that value and importance to the community, government leaders, and other decision-makers.

Your primary function as a library advocate will be to provide clear, accurate, and timely information on library issues to people who need it in order to make sound decisions on those issues. This information can be provided orally or in writing. It may have such diverse objectives as shaping public opinion in a general way or influencing a specific vote on a library issue by the local unit of government.

Libraries need their trustees to act as advocates for several reasons. Pressures on local, county, and state budgets makes it harder than ever for libraries to obtain adequate funding. As a representative of the general public, you can make a more effective case on the importance of adequate funding for the library than the librarian who may be viewed as having a vested interest in a larger budget. Because public libraries have a unique place in local government, their needs may not be as readily understood by government officials as those of other units of government, and a greater effort is needed to tell the library story.

In addition, because library systems primarily provide “behind the scenes” services, an extra effort is sometimes needed to make government officials aware of their services and the value of those services to the public.

Establish priorities for advocacy

Since the advocacy role is a basic duty of a library board member, it’s important to channel these energies carefully. Early each year, the library board acting as a whole should decide which of its goals or positions to advocate most strenuously. Emphasis will vary by library. For instance, you and the library board might work for the adoption of an improved library budget, seek support for enhanced library technology, or inform the public of the need for a library building program. What is important is that you decide with other library board members what the areas of emphasis will be and how board members will go about advocating those goals or positions.

Your goal as an advocate is to shape the local decision-making process, which requires an understanding of how decisions are made in the community and who must be influenced in order to achieve favorable outcomes.

Staying informed

Your effectiveness as an advocate depends on being well informed about library issues at the local, state, and federal levels. See *Trustee Essential #27: Trustee Orientation and Continuing Education* for information on where to turn to stay informed about these issues.

Ways to act as an advocate

As an advocate, you can influence decision-makers by:

- speaking to civic groups about library needs and issues.
- talking to friends about the library, its role in the community, and its needs.
- writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper.
- testifying at local and state budget hearings.
- talking and writing to state and federal legislators about the needs of the library.
- contributing to a library newsletter that is sent to decision-makers.

If you choose to advocate a library-related position not agreed on by the board, be sure to make clear that you are speaking for yourself as an individual, not for the board.

Your work as a library advocate is never done. Each success leads to a new area of effort. Library advocacy does not represent a narrow commitment to a single issue—it's an ongoing commitment to supporting library issues in a wide range of ways.

Discussion Questions:

1. How is library advocacy different from other basic trustee duties?
2. What are some issues being faced by your library on which library board members can exercise influence through advocacy?
3. How does the advocacy role of an individual board member differ from the role of the board as whole?

Sources of Additional Information:

You and your fellow library board members are not alone in advocating for high-quality public library service. There are a number of groups that share your belief in the value of public library service and can provide information and support you in advocacy efforts. Some of these groups are listed below, along with other tools to help you advocate for your library.

Your library system staff (see *Trustee Tool B: Library System Map and Contact Information*)

Division for Libraries, Technology, and Community Learning staff (see *Trustee Tool C* for contact information)

Wisconsin Library Association (WLA) (at <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us>)

Wisconsin Library Trustee Association (WLTA) (at <http://www.wla.lib.wi.us/wlta>)

Association of Library Trustees and Advocates (ALTA) (at <http://www.ala.org/alta>)

Friends of Wisconsin Libraries (FOWL) (at <http://www.cheesestate.com/friends>)

Friends of Libraries U.S.A. (FOLUSA) (at <http://www.folusa.com>)

Who Are My Legislators web page (at <http://www.legis.state.wi.us/wamltest>)

Contact information for your United States Senators: <http://www.senate.gov/contacting>

Contact information for your United States Representatives:
<http://clerkweb.house.gov/mbrcmtee/members/housemem.htm>

This *Trustee Essential* was adapted, with permission, from *Tools of the Trade for Trustees: Library Advocacy*, by Milton Mitchell, former Director of the Indianhead Federated Library System.

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